

GOLFSPECIAL

Charles Starmer-Smith discovers what makes a golf club swing at a course that opened in the Caribbean only a few months ago, while Nick Trend visits the recently created Terre Blanche in Provence, which seems as old as the hills in which it lies



Take the rough with the smooth: tee-offs can be tricky at the Canouan resort, where the course rises dramatically from sea level to the rim of an extinct volcano

A whole new ball game

Have you thought of a name for the course yet?" asked Wayne Greer, a professional at Canouan's Trump International Golf Club, as I trudged off the 18th hole after my errant approach shot had sent a group of green-keepers diving for cover. This exotic course in the corner of the Caribbean is so new – it opened last November – that it has yet to be named.

"How about Canouan Seemaball?" I replied. Thankfully he laughed at my attempt at humour, but confirmed that the temporary name of "Paradise Found" will suffice for now.

And it does. Put simply, this 18-hole course situated in a tiny island just south of Mustique is the most stunning course I have ever played. Designed by Jim Fazio, one of America's famed golf architect brothers, it flows so naturally along the contours of the island's landscape that even those who feel golf courses are a blight on the landscape might change their mind here.

The opening holes unfold in a natural amphitheatre – several banks of the resort's villas are built into the hillside to form a

horseshoe shape around the opening holes. Rich green fairways and hibiscus-lined borders contrast vividly with the turquoise waters, and whenever your ball strays off the straight and narrow, turtles and lizards scurry under rocks and foliage for cover. This exotic course in the corner of the Caribbean is so new – it opened last November – that it has yet to be named.

The course rises dramatically – from sea level to the 840ft rim of an extinct volcano – within the space of a few holes, while rocky, tree-lined cliffs give way to sandy beaches on all sides.

Donald Trump, who through Raffles Resorts has attached his name to the course (and the property developments around it), claims that after years of trying to find the perfect Caribbean location he has finally fulfilled his vision here. However, one member of staff admitted that the billionaire businessman has only been to the island once.

Rocky walls flanking the fairways, clever dog-legs and tricky tee-offs can make life difficult over the opening holes. But it is not until the sixth that the coastline comes into play. The fairway feels as though it's on a knife edge and tightly hugs

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Golfing holidays

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the ocean cliffs – the sea views are only interrupted by the mile-long Godahl reef and the twinned thatched cottages of the resort's Amrita spa, which stand out to sea on stilts.

From the ninth, which takes you back to the clubhouse, you can catch sight of the spires of a 17th-century Anglican church that was brought over stone by stone from Canterbury and is now used for weddings and special events. It seems remarkably out of place.

The front nine is less dramatic than the back nine, deliberately so. Modest golfers can practise these holes that are shorter and better protected from the elements and then attempt the rest later in the week.

It is on the inward nine that ball placement, rather than power, becomes the key. The landscape rises and falls some 500 feet, narrow fairways and undulating greens become less and less inviting, while the views do the opposite. The par

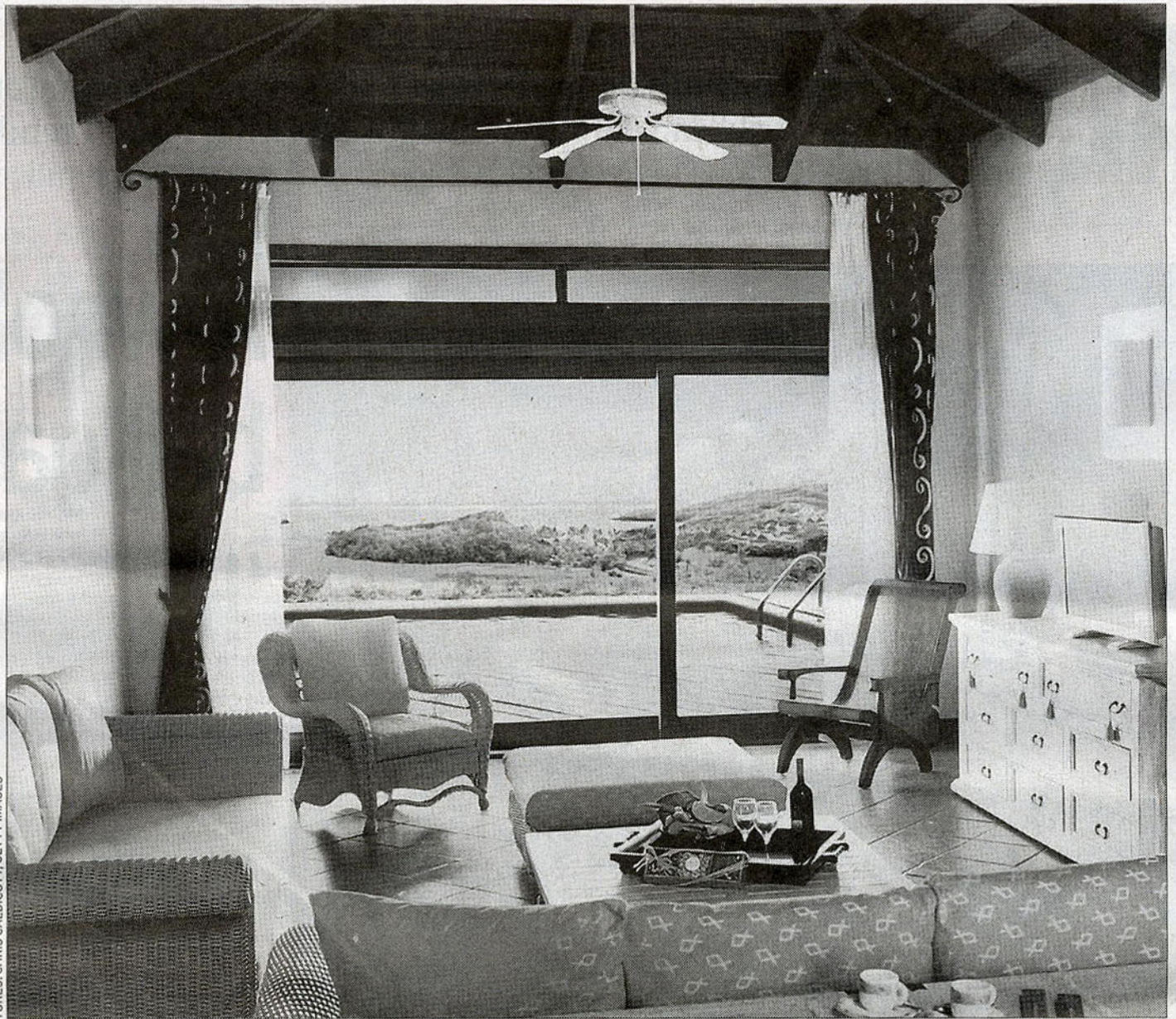
The green-keepers working on the course probably outnumbered those who had played golf all week

four 11th forces you to drive dramatically over a deep ravine onto an angled fairway, where anything pushed right will leave you reaching for another ball from your bag. The par three 13th and 16th take you 100 feet and 300 feet above the greens; here headwinds force you to club down and the bunkers threaten to teach you a new meaning of the term "plugged".

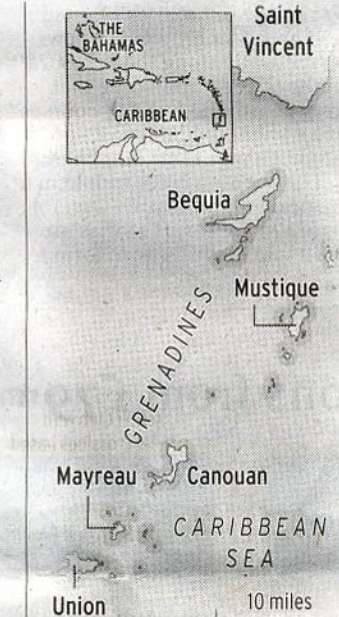
But it's the 13th that is the signature hole. Climbing to the highest point on the course, it is difficult to take your eyes off the 360 degree panoramic views of Mustique to the north, and Mayreau, Union Island and Tobago Cays, which boasts one of the world's largest coral reefs, to the south. I three-putted from 10 feet, but cared little.

Although accuracy, not distance, is usually at a premium on most shots, as Greer suggests, there are still holes like the 15th that "bring out the Tiger in you". Here, you are faced with a make-or-break option of baling out right with a low iron to the fairway or taking on a treacherous 280-yard drive between two cliff-tops to a postage-stamp-sized green.

The only real disappointment is the 18th hole – this very straightforward par four that takes you back to the clubhouse is a poor finale, despite the man-made lake protecting the green. It was really only then, when I was less focused on taking in the surroundings, that I realised I had not seen another player, besides my partner, anywhere on the course. It has been open eight months, yet the 60-odd green-keepers working on the course (who down tools and act as a very unwelcome audience when you step onto the tee) probably outnumbered those who had played golf all week.



Above par: Raffles resort and its golf course, which is as good as any in the Caribbean, as Donald Trump, below, would no doubt agree



The basics

Charles Starmer-Smith travelled with Abercrombie & Kent (0845 070 0614, www.abercrombiekent.co.uk), which offers seven nights' b&b at Raffles Resort Canouan Island from £1,499 per person in an Orchestra Garden Room. Prices include international flights with British Airways and transfers.

Why? Because unlike the golfing monoliths of Barbados, which will soon boast seven courses, and Bermuda, which has eight, Canouan is less a golfing destination and more a resort with a golf course. It places as much importance on its spa, watersports, four restaurants, casino, bars and beaches. Very few people seem to bring their own clubs; in fact, non-golfers are in the majority. Golf carts, which come free with each of the 156 villas and suites, are far more likely to be seen hurtling between the far-flung parts of the resort than negotiating the steep inclines between holes.

Away from the golf the facilities can rival anything the Caribbean has to offer – the villas and suites as luxurious and as generously spaced as those at Sandy Lane. Assertions that this Raffles Resort might be part of the new "Chavibbean" are wrong, or at least premature. The clientele that week were a cosmopolitan mixture of Germans, French, Russians, Italians, Americans and English. No Rooneyettes, footballers' wives or Burberry here. For Alan Shearer read Angelina Jolie – who the week before I was there could have been spotted sipping a bellini at the bar overlooking the course.

The prices, though, are just as prohibitive as at Sandy Lane. A round of golf, even for guests, costs £100, for visitors £130. One week's

accommodation starts from £1,500, although the very wealthy might simply decide instead to buy one of the million-pound villas along the course, complete with garage, plunge pool and Jacuzzi.

So how does Raffles' first foray into golf compare with the Caribbean's other great courses?

From small beginnings as an overgrown nine-hole golf course that was once part of the former Carnegie Bay resort, Fazio's restoration has been remarkable. The colour of the Paspalam grass is as green as the manicured lawns of Augusta – though a few eyebrows may be raised at the near 500,000 gallons of fresh water pumped out

around the course each day (enough to fill an Olympic-size swimming pool).

It might not have the length to be a true championship course – from the back tees it stands at just 6,483 yards, compared to the 7,400 yards of Sandy Lane's latest course, the Green Monkey (which was designed by Fazio's brother, Tom).

And the lack of hotels as well as accessibility problems – the only air-link to the island is a daily 16-seater Cessna from Barbados – means that Canouan never stage the or tour events courses such as the Ritz White Jamaica, Seasons Nevis, or the Royal Westmoreland and Green Monkey in Barbados aspire to host.

Canouan has the basic facilities you would expect of a top golf course – neat pyramids of golf balls await you on the driving range, chipping and putting greens and golfing clinics are offered daily.

It does not, however, have GPS tracking and wind speed on the buggies or a button to summon a waiter with ice-cold refreshments that some Caribbean resorts boast – but is all the better for it. **CS-S**

